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FLORIS SOLLEVELD

A PARADIGM FOR WHAT?

Review of: Henk Borgdorff (2012) *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*. Leiden: Leiden University Press, xvii, 277 pp.

Krisis, 2012, Issue 2

[www.krisis.eu](http://www.krisis.eu)

A lot of ink has been spilled on the Artistic Research Debate. In the United Kingdom that debate started with Christopher Frayling's paper *Research in Art and Design* (1993); in Holland, it set off in 2004 with the *Boekman* 'Art and Science' issue and the *Artistic Research* volume in the *Lier&Boog* series (Balkema and Slager 2004). In both cases, the debate quickly followed upon policy reforms that paved the way for doctorates in the creative and performing arts. There are three sides to that debate: a *bureaucratic* debate ('how can we get art recognized – and *funded* – as research?'); a *philosophical* debate ('do the arts produce *knowledge*, and how?'), and an oddly neglected *artistic* side of the debate ('what should it be like / where are we going?'). The number of conference proceedings and volumes of essays is now well above a hundred;<sup>1</sup> recent collections

that give an overview of this state of affairs are Conomos and Buckley (2009), Biggs and Karlsson (2010), and Elkins (2009). However, apart from the 'Manifestoes' of Hannula, Suaronta and Vadén (2005) and Coessens, Crispin and Douglas (2009), a book-length study has been lacking.

Henk Borgdorff has been a crucial voice in this debate in the last ten years, particularly in his oft-cited 2006 article 'The Debate on Research in the Arts' (reprinted as Chapter 2 in the present volume). Now his papers on the topic have been gathered in his dissertation *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*, by which he obtained his doctorate this May at Leiden University. For those who have followed the debate, Borgdorff's book will contain little that is new. All the same, it presents the crowning achievement of the work of a decade. Having abandoned a PhD fellowship to become *lector* at the Amsterdam School of the Arts, Borgdorff presents the rare case of a scholar obtaining his PhD while already an established authority in the field; equally, it is a rare case of a promotion *cum laude* based on previously published material, and a hard-fought thesis defence with substantial and critical questions. In a way, *The Conflict of the Faculties* is more a handbook than a dissertation – all the more so because of its form and layout, with regular summaries and marginalia in yellow text boxes.

A recurrent qualm about the Artistic Research Debate is that it is very much in the abstract, more about what 'artistic research' could theoretically mean than about concrete research outcomes. *The Conflict of the Faculties* does nothing to allay this qualm: there are no examples in it whatsoever. However, in the last two chapters of the book, Borgdorff presents his ongoing project for an online *Journal of Artistic Research* and a related *Artistic Research Catalogue*, which are meant to provide a platform for publications and case studies that escape the standard scholarly format – to indicate their hybrid artistic/scholarly nature, they are referred to as 'expositions'. (211)

Still, after almost twenty years of debate, there is as yet no satisfactory answer as to what artistic research is. Few people outside the contemporary art world are aware that there are currently thousands of artists pursuing a PhD; I remember a history and philosophy of science symposium on

‘discipline formation’ in 2009 where none of the participants was even aware of its existence. Although the debate has been overwhelmingly concerned with methodology and epistemology, most of this discussion has been in a top-down fashion, addressing the nature of ‘art’ and ‘science’ in the abstract rather than looking at what artists/researchers are actually doing.

Borgdorff’s work, unfortunately, is no exception. The question on ‘the intrinsic nature of artistic research’ (44) is mainly answered through typologies, and through summing up programmes, institutions, and regulations. In Chapters 2 and 4, Borgdorff draws a distinction between an ontological, an epistemological, and a methodological question (44-53; 122-4). To summarize briefly: Borgdorff’s epistemology amounts to an appeal to tacit rather than explicit knowledge (Polanyi 1966), and to knowing how rather than knowing that (Ryle 1949); with his methodology, to an appeal to hermeneutics and free exploration; and with an ontology, to an emphasis on non-conceptual content (Merleau-Ponty *passim*; Dreyfus 1982) and ‘thought, rather than theory’ (124). Elsewhere, he distinguishes between ‘a) research on the arts; b) research for the arts; and c) research in the arts’ (37).<sup>2</sup> The first is conventional humanities research: art history, musicology, theatre studies etc. The second is applied research on technology (and also, documentation) that is used artistically. It is the third, research *in* the arts, that is conceptually challenging and problematic.

Four arguments have often been invoked in favour of artistic research as a discipline. The first is that artistic research marks a paradigm shift, hence it leads to new knowledge (Hannula, Suaronta and Vadén 2005; Coessens, Crispin and Douglas 2009). The second is that according to Feyerabend, ‘anything goes’; hence art can also be research (*ibid.*, oddly enough.). The third argument is that according to Derrida, ‘il n’y a pas d’hors-texte’; therefore an artwork can also be a thesis (Lesage 2009). The fourth is that according to Deleuze, knowledge is rhizomatic, and so is artistic thinking, hence art is also research (Slager 2011.) These arguments are so obviously begging the question and based on authority rather than evidence that they can just as well be labeled pitfalls. Apart from paying lip service to art as ‘unfinished thinking’ (71) Borgdorff avoids most of these pitfalls, invoking none of the above authorities and adopting the notion of a ‘paradigm

shift’ only in an infrastructural sense, as building a framework of institutions, organizations, publications, conferences, government bodies, and funding agencies (110).

Borgdorff’s concern, throughout the book, is not so much with what artistic research means for the arts as with what it means for academia. This is why his title alludes to Kant’s famous essay *Die Streit der Fakultäten*: just as Kant argued for the equal and even central role of the philosophical faculty in relation to the legal, theological, and medical faculties, so Borgdorff’s claim is that research in the arts has a fully legitimate place within academia. On the one hand, it contributes to the unity of research and teaching: ‘One already distinguishing feature of arts education is its in-house integration of training with practice, as artists make their current work into part of the education subject matter. These bonds with art practice can be tightened further by creating links between artists’ research practices and teaching practices at the academies’ (60). On the other, ‘the introduction of artistic research into an academic environment could broaden our conception of what academic or scientific research truly is’ (60-1). On the whole, this is ‘fully consistent with Humboldtian ideals’ (60).

It must be noted here that by ‘academia’ Borgdorff does not mean the confines of university structures as they are now, but rather what academia could be: ‘Articulating artistic research in academia amounts to a proposition to speak differently of academia, to reconfigure academia’ (12.) In spite of the massive proliferation of artistic research at art academies and universities throughout Europe, this is still a far cry; rather than bringing about such a sea-change, artistic research is largely a spin-off from the 1992 UK university reform and the Bologna Process. To stick to the metaphor of a ‘paradigm shift’, there has not yet been a groundbreaking artistic research work that opened up radically new artistic vistas or initiated new research programmes. The ‘new paradigm’ still lacks its Einstein, its *Démoiselles d’Avignon* or brillo box. What *has* changed is that performances and exhibitions are increasingly being presented in an academic format, with symposia and publications – the so-called ‘Educational Turn’ (Rogoff 2008, Wilson and O’Neill 2010). Art academies have changed drastically, employing researchers and lecturers, cooperating or

merging with universities and massively increasing the share of theory in the curriculum. And researchers *on* art in the humanities are faced with a new situation in which their object of study *talks back*. But in terms of new artistic/intellectual attitudes, artistic research has not progressed much beyond conceptual art of the 60s and 70s.

In spite of his Humboldtian ideals, Borgdorff's language is predominantly bureaucratic. (Particularly so in Chapter 4, 'Artistic Research within the Fields of Science', published previously in *Krisis* 2009:1.) Important recent breakthroughs were when the OECD adapted its *Frascati Manual* to include research in the arts (OECD 2007, §6.4), and when Helga Nowotny, President of the European Research Council, stated that the ERC was 'principally open to funding artistic research as well' (Nowotny 2010: xxiv). Borgdorff's concern with such developments shows that this is not armchair philosophy, rather, he is continually on a tightrope between lobbying for the institutionalization of artistic research and critically assessing the impact of this academicization. But it also shows something different. The question on 'the intrinsic nature of artistic research' may have yielded no very specific answer, and to the extent that it dealt with 'art' and 'science' in the abstract it may even have been wrongly posed. Institutionally, however, it is now firmly founded, and the Artistic Research Debate has moved on to different issues: dissemination, accreditation, forms of presentation, and even 'canon formation'.

Most interesting to philosophers is Chapter 7, 'The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research', which deals with art as 'non-conceptual content'. This is where Kant kicks in again: by making reference to the role of aesthetic judgement in Kant's third Critique, which forms a bridge between *Sinnlichkeit* and understanding, Borgdorff suggests a similar role for artistic research as a mediator between our lived experience and explicit knowledge, through the 'world-revealing power of art' (173). Borgdorff addresses the issue of 'non-conceptual content' from a phenomenological as well as an analytical perspective – that is, both in terms of the relation between our practical and our theoretical understanding of the world and of McDowell's (1994) attempt to 'reconcile reason and nature'. In true synthetic fashion, the chapter ends with a discussion of the debate between Dreyfus and McDowell on the gap or continuum between

experience and knowledge. Promising as that may sound, Borgdorff's suggestion is largely *petitio principii*: he concludes in defining artistic research as the acceptance of art's 'paradoxical invitation (...) to think "without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. concept, being adequate to it"'<sup>3</sup> (171). Laudable as an attempt at de-mystification, this conclusion leaves the gap between experience and knowledge well in place.

On the whole, Borgdorff's book is summary rather than visionary. In spite of the title 'Perspectives', it is indeed a handbook. This is no mean feat, but it shows that the story of the 'Artistic Research Revolution' is yet to be written. Although the initial phase of discipline formation is by now obviously over, it is perhaps too soon to tell. (For further reading, there are articles by Bogh (2009) on the changing role of art academies, and Holert (2009) on the progeny of artistic research in conceptual art). A comprehensive analysis of how current developments in this field affect the arts and academia is further complicated by the glaring gap in the postwar historiography of higher arts education. There are monographs on HfG Ulm and Black Mountain College, there are centennial yearbooks, there is an overview article by Schwarz (2007) and there is Madoff (2009). But a history of 'Academies of Art, Past and Present' has not been written since Pevsner (1940). To arrive at an informed judgement of where artistic research is heading, or whether it is indeed the emperor's new clothes, this gap needs to be filled.


Floris Solleveld (1982) studied philosophy in Amsterdam and is now a PhD Researcher at Radboud University Nijmegen, on the project *How the Humanities turned Scientific: Ideals and Practices of Scholarship between Enlightenment and Romanticism*. Additionally, he writes about avant-garde music and interdisciplinary art. From 2008-2012, he worked for the European League of Institutes of the Arts (ELIA).

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<sup>1</sup> A recent overview is at <http://sharenetwork.eu/artistic-research-overview/bibliography> (accessed 21 June 2012); a previous version was published as Solleveld (2010).

<sup>2</sup> This is a reformulation of a distinction made in Frayling (1993); a similar tripartition has been made by Brown, Gough and Robbins (2004) and Elkins (2003/2009).

<sup>3</sup> The latter part is in quotation marks in (Borgdorff 2012); however, it is unclear where the quote is from.